

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Applying an ecological framework to understand transition pathways to post-secondary education for youth with physical disabilities

**“... we need to consider more than just the preparation of individuals for transition but also consider where we are transitioning them to and the ability of those new environments to be accepting and accommodating of youth” (p. 285).**

## 1. What is the research about?

Attending post-secondary education (PSE) has been linked to a number of benefits among youth living with physical disabilities, including improvements in employment, income, wellbeing, and social inclusion. Research shows that those who graduate from PSE are 63% more likely to be employed compared to their peers without PSE credentials (p. 277). However, youth living with disabilities are much less likely to attend PSE in contrast to their peers. Common challenges include inadequate transition supports in high school, as well as issues related to disclosure, accommodations, accessibility, and transportation. This study explores the transition to PSE from the perspectives of youth living with physical disabilities and the clinicians who support these young people.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in Toronto.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth living with disabilities and the clinicians who support them in their transition to PSE. The youth were aged 17-29 and had attended some PSE (11 were in school, five had graduated, and four had dropped out). The clinicians included psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and educators.

## 4. How was the research done?

Researchers conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews over the phone and in person. Participants included 20 youth living with disabilities and 10 clinicians employed at a local pediatric hospital. Youth had attended at least one appointment with a clinician offering post-secondary transition services. Clinicians had at least one year of experience in helping youth transition to PSE. All participants received a \$10 honorarium.

Interview questions were based on key transition principles, including structural, relational, and personal factors, as well as organization and availability of care. Data from youth and clinician interviews were analyzed separately before being compared and contrasted.

A limitation of the study is that youth who were successful in going on to PSE may have been more likely to participate.

## 5. What are the key findings?

This study identifies a number of individual, relational, and structural factors that impact the transition experiences of youth living with physical disabilities:

### a) Individual Factors

**Disability-specific issues** (e.g., coping, self-care, disclosure, and accommodations) can act as barriers, so a variety of **life skills** (e.g., self-advocacy and navigating public transportation) can contribute to a successful transition to PSE. **Self-advocacy skills** are particularly important for overcoming transition-related challenges, such as disclosing one's disability and receiving accommodations.

### b) Relational Factors

Youth living with disabilities encounter different **expectations** from parents and clinicians, and are often encouraged to spend an extra year in high school. Therefore, levels of **peer and family support** can impact young people's decisions about where and when to go to school.

### c) Structural Factors

Although post-secondary institutions are legally required to be accessible, youth routinely encounter **disabling environments**, and experience **stigma and discrimination** from both professors and peers. Their transition experiences are also influenced by **age-related supports**, many of which end at the age of 18, when they must transition to adult health care. **Inter-professional and inter-agency collaboration** is lacking, with no formal, inter-agency transition pathway in place to assist youth during the transition to PSE.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth workers can support young people living with physical disabilities in their transition to PSE by:

- a) **fostering relevant life skills**, such as self-advocacy, disclosure, and navigating public transportation;
- b) **supporting disclosure** of young people's disabilities;
- c) **assisting in requesting and setting up accommodations** for youth; and
- d) **connecting youth to resources** that can aid in setting career goals and developing career paths.

Organizations can enhance young people's transition experiences by **promoting improved inter-professional collaboration** among clinicians, and **advocating for inter-agency partnerships** among high schools, disability organizations/advocates, and PSE institutions.



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